

NCERT's Silver Jubilee

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IT is unthinkable that anyone involved in education today should have the time and the frame of mind to jubilate. The scene is extremely dismal by whatever standard one chooses to look at it. The system now seems capable of just one social function—that of selection, and this function has now reached a point not far from the limit of its sustainability. In the educationally backward state of Madhya Pradesh, for instance, the high school examination this year failed nearly 2 lakh out of the 2.5 lakh students who appeared, and just 800 got first division marks. Such news fails to arouse public opinion because every sector of education is sick. From kindergarten to university, education has become a cruel process, socialising the successful to acquiesce in injustice, and the unsuccessful to become lumpen. How can any educator jubilate at such a time? Yet, this is when the highest ranking organisation involved in school curriculum, examination reform, and teacher naming, namely the NCERT, has chosen to celebrate its routine completion of 25 years.

The NCERT was born in an era of innocence. The sixties had been hailed as the 'development decade', and the meaning of development was simple—gradual transformation of the newly independent colonies like India into Western-like nation states. This appeared to be an achievable goal under the aegis of international, particularly American, aid. The just published 'Stages of Economic Growth' by W W Rostow had charted the course that the poorer countries were embarked on, and the rich nations of the West were unhesitatingly described as partners in the development of the poor. Education was expected to provide a major push to development, and it looked appropriate to modernise education to equip it for the enormous task of social transformation. American aid was plentifully available for the modernisation of Indian education. Under the USAID programme, nine major projects in key areas of educational theory and practice were launched in 1962 to set the newly established NCERT on its future track. Two teams of experts from Columbia and Ohio led the projects which were to leave an indelible impression on the NCERT's ideas and work in the years to come.

The expertise transferred to Indian hands in that early period was never perceived as an ideological burden—indeed, the job was so perfectly done that even the suspicion that education might be a carrier of ideology never arose. The NCERT has kept its innocence intact while the world around has changed. While the dream of Indo-American partnership has been shattered in virtually all other spheres including foreign policy, the NCERT continues to be its relic. The terminology of its publications, the bibliographies cited in them, its library holdings,

and the thrust of its educational visions continue to offer evidence of the effectiveness of what has been described as the policy of 'imperial liberalism'. Before considering what this legacy means in practical terms, it is necessary to remember that the NCFRT also has a verifiable nationalist face. Many of its programmes and personnel have genuine nationalist ideals. *Albeit* ineffectively, its faculty did oppose 'model' schools when they were first discussed, and criticised the CLASS project initiated under the impetus of the dubious British 'gift' of Acorn computers. Indeed, when one takes into account the trials and tribulations that many among the NCERT faculty face balancing their way through bureaucratic governance and academic expectations, one can understand the dilemma that an organisation representing *etatiste* nationalism is permanently faced with.

The NCERT has worked on a wide range of educational enterprises—from field research to text-creation—and its contribution to school education in the country cannot be judged in one sweep. Its All India Educational Surveys filled in the blank caused by the serious decline in field reporting routinely done by the civil service since the late nineteenth century. The field studies in sociology of education commissioned by it in the late sixties were an important gesture of interest in an underdeveloped sphere of education study. But the NCERT stopped with the skeleton knowledge of the Indian school that these studies generated. Sociological orientation could not compete with the psychologism that the American connection had implanted early, and which, in any case, had been the ruling spirit of educational training and study in India since long before the NCERT's creation. With a fresh commitment to psychologism (reinforced by the rise of the Bloom school in America), plenty of money to spend, a nation-wide machinery

for communication, and monopoly of legitimacy to reform education, the NCERT blocked the road for the social study of education and its milieu-rooted reform. It technocratised educational discourse, and briskly sapped what little energy and legitimacy was left in ideas (e.g., basic education) and programmes associated with the independence movement. Little wonder that people like J P Naik, whose understanding of education was earthier, found in the NCERT a white elephant, and impediment to the growth of indigenous imagination and activity. Numerous less known individuals and small-scale innovators like the Kishore Bharati group arrived at a similar perception. In twenty-five years, the National Council has shrunk to a self-enhancing fiefdom.

A normative view of curriculum, wrapped in behaviouristic jargon, is what the NCERT has offered to the country. The capacity to relate knowledge to the child's milieu, and to develop in teachers the confidence to grant autonomy to the child is beyond this view. Yet precisely such capacity is parroted in publicity material, for it helps to hide the subtle hope of building a centralised system of curricular dispensation. Even a body so dependent on American sources could have developed an awareness of how obtuse this agenda was, had it been open to the critical stream within American educational theory. But neither such exposure nor an interest in India's own history and society was available to the NCERT. So it ended up with didactic writing in science (for a critique, see *Science Today*, December 1977) and formula-bound lessons in language. Fortuitous circumstances led to some competent work in history, but even there no attempt was ever made to root new content in inquiry-based pedagogy. Working with ordinary teachers has proved a crippling challenge for the NCERT. It has never taken a kind view of the Indian school master: he has been a source of irritation, a diseased old element stopping the modern body's blossoming in total glory. The daily misery of the teacher's existence is not, after all, the NCERT's concern.

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